

Achievement Gap Cannot Be Closed Without First Reducing the Opportunity Gap: A Case Study of Model Schools for Inner Cities

Prepared by Maria Yau & Vicky Branco
Toronto District School Board
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1. Background and Objectives

The Toronto District School Board (TDSB), the largest school system in Canada, serves over 250,000 students in nearly 600 schools across the city of Toronto. Aside from its size, the TDSB has the world's most multicultural and multilingual population with over three quarters of students who are of immigrant and/or visible minority background (*Author, 2007*). Besides being culturally diverse, over the past three decades Toronto has witnessed growing geographically bound economic disparities with the middle-income area of the city shrinking dramatically between 1970 and 2005, while the high-income area increased slightly and the low-income area expanded substantially (*Hulchanski, 2006*). In fact, according to the TDSB's first *Parent Census* study (*Author, 2009*), at least half of its elementary school students come from the two lowest income bracket groups. Another internal study further indicates that, "some of the biggest discrepancies in students' educational outcomes and school engagement are among different racial groups and family socio-economic status (SES)" (*Sinay, Zheng, & Anastaskos, 2012*). In light of rising poverty and the widening achievement gap, in 2006 the TDSB launched a system-wide initiative, known as Model Schools for Inner Cities (MSIC), beginning with seven elementary schools (reaching almost 3,600 students) situated in several of the neediest communities across the city.

To mitigate the negative effects of poverty on students' academic outcomes, MSIC adopts an integrated multidisciplinary approach under the premises that inequitable educational outcomes cannot be resolved without addressing the opportunity gap issue for socio-economically disadvantaged students. These include, for example, helping to meet students' basic physical needs, fostering their social and emotional well-being, enriching their out-of-school learning experiences, engaging marginalized families, and partnering with the community. This study, based on several years of data collection and research on the seven original model schools, examines the following questions.

- a) Was the MSIC initiative effective in reducing students' opportunity gap in the seven inner-city model schools?
- b) Did the seven model schools show improvement in their students' learning outcomes?

- c) What were the program elements and conditions that made MSIC effective in producing sustainable change for the model schools?

2. Perspectives

The underlying philosophy behind MSIC is equity of outcomes for all children and levelling the playing field for all students regardless of socio-economic or cultural background (TDSB, 2005). The MSIC project itself consists of five Essential Components (TDSB, 2005).

1. Innovation in teaching/learning practice and in school structure – For example, through enriched and experiential learning opportunities to engage students, nurture their creativity and critical thinking skills, and support improved academic performance. A social justice curriculum and culturally responsive practices are aimed to increase relevance and rigour for students.
2. Support services to meet the social, emotional and physical well-being of students – This is based on the recognition that “hungry children cannot learn, that children whose mental or physical health is precarious will not thrive, and those who cannot see or hear properly are unfairly situated to succeed like their more affluent peers.” A multi-disciplinary approach is called for to address students’ physical, social and emotional needs.
3. School as the heart of the community – For example, through active school parent councils, school representation on external groups that advocate for children and their families, community groups and external agencies involved in school based programs. Other examples include strong parental involvement, and safe, welcoming school environments.
4. Research, review and evaluation of students and programs – Please see below for further details.
5. Commitment to share successful practice – As educational lighthouses, Model Schools are expected to share innovative practices, program initiatives and school structures through professional development opportunities within and outside the school board.

3 & 4. Methods and Data Sources

As one of the five MSIC Essential Components, a comprehensive annual school research and review framework was developed with a two-fold purpose:

1. **Formative** evaluation - providing regular feedback for school administrators and staff to monitor students' performance and school progress, to identify needs, and to focus school efforts and directions. The aim is for continuous school improvement.

2. **Summative** evaluation - providing all stakeholders with an assessment of the overall long-term impact of the school efforts on student performance and the school community as a whole. This serves the function of accountability.

In light of the multidimensionality and the holistic nature of MSIC, a mixed approach design or multi-methodology was deployed. To answer the three research questions, the following mixed methods were employed.

- a) Was the MSIC initiative effective in reducing students' opportunity gap in the seven inner-city model schools?

Both quantitative and qualitative measures were used – including the Child/Youth Resiliency questionnaire (Donnon & Hammond, 2007); the Early Development Instrument (EDI, Janus & Offord, 2007); MSIC school surveys for students, parents and staff; vision and auditory screening records; findings from ongoing evaluation studies of programs such as the Beyond 3:30 After-School Program, and the Model Schools Paediatric Health Initiative.

- b) Did the seven model schools show improvement in their students' learning outcomes?

Multiple data sources and measures were utilized - including the Canadian Achievement Tests (CAT4, Canadian Test Centre, 2010); Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) provincial test results; TDSB centrally available student information data on students' progress report cards, absenteeism, truancy, and suspension. Longitudinal tracking and value-added assessments were conducted to determine growth trajectories over time.

- c) What were the program elements and conditions that made MSIC effective in producing sustainable change for the seven model schools?

Again both quantitative and qualitative measures were employed – including information on funding and resource allocations; program registration and attendance records; program evaluation findings; site observations; and individual and focus group interviews with different stakeholder groups including the board's senior officials, central support staff, school administrators, teachers, students, parents and community partners.

5. Results

The answers to the three research questions above were informed by analyses of the vast longitudinal quantitative and qualitative data collected since 2006. The findings are highlighted below.

- a) All seven model schools reduced the opportunity gap over time – in terms of meeting students’ physical needs (e.g., basic nutrition, vision and hearing conditions, physical ailments); enhancing their social and emotional well-being (e.g., resiliency and developmental conditions); enriching their out-of-school learning experiences (e.g., field trips); increasing family involvement; and expanding community partnerships (e.g., with the health sector).
- b) All seven model schools narrowed the achievement gap – moving from below the CAT4 norm in reading, writing and math basic skills at baseline, to at or above the expected level and building important foundations for continuous learning. In addition, the EDI results have indicated increased readiness for schooling among young children attending the model schools. Furthermore, data have shown reduced school absenteeism and lateness, and improved school atmosphere for learning.
- c) While the current study does not delineate which specific project components could have contributed to the overall positive results, it is evident from some of the ongoing MSIC program evaluation findings that no single initiative could make a sustainable difference. According to stakeholder focus group interviews, it was the collective and integrated efforts that made consolidated changes. Some of the combined MSIC initiatives that produced beneficial impacts for the MSIC students included the following centrally supported strategies.
- Hearing and Visioning screening – In 2010-2011, over 19,000 children were screened for hearing and vision issues, one third of whom were referred for follow-up and provided with free glasses.
 - In-school paediatric clinics were piloted in a few schools to address physical and developmental health issues, along with a Telepsychiatry partnership with Toronto’s Hospital for Sick Children in one model school.
 - Parent engagement – The MSIC office organized yearly parent conferences; and individual model schools offered parent workshops, after school programs and training to help parents understand the education system and engage more in their children’s learning.
 - Community partnerships were forged to ensure access for students and their families to community events and resources.
 - Nutrition and meal programs were offered to meet students’ basic needs.
 - Concentrated curriculum with a social justice lens was adopted in model schools.
 - MSIC Office and funds offered school staff with greater opportunities for professional development and involvement in school planning and decision-making.

- Extended and multi-faceted after-school programs (e.g., Beyond 3:30) were offered for inner-city adolescents to have a safe place to learn and play during after-school hours.
- MSIC specialized staff – e.g., Teaching/Learning Coaches, Community Support Workers, Social Workers, and Lead Teachers - were assigned to individual schools to offer extended support.

This multi-year research on the seven model schools further demonstrates that high needs schools - no matter how challenging – can help bring about positive change for students, and can narrow, if not completely close, the opportunity and subsequently the achievement gap *so long as* the school has or is provided with the following:

- Solid support and resources to level the playing field
- Extra efforts and innovative pedagogies to make up the initial achievement gaps
- Ongoing research and feedback to help monitor progress for program or curricular adjustments where necessary
- Sufficient time to demonstrate growth – the more challenging the school the longer the time is needed
- Sustained leadership which is fair, open, collaborative, forward thinking and visionary
- School staff who are committed and share the vision

Research thus far suggests that it is imperative to maintain the above conditions not only for the purpose of closing the gap, but also for preventing the gap from widening again in inner-city communities where adverse social circumstances persist.

Finally, it should be noted that while all seven Model Schools manifested positive outcomes in various domains over time, there were variations among the different schools in terms of the degree of progress made, the rate of growth, and the main areas of improvement. Further investigation indicates that the varying degrees of gain were associated with the level of and the unique set of external challenges (e.g., SES) faced by each school community, the initial academic standing (baseline) of the students in individual schools, and the school's internal organizational structure (e.g., leadership and staff). For instance, according to a longitudinal and comparative analysis of CAT4 test results of the seven model schools, the schools from the most impoverished neighbourhoods seemed to require more time (e.g., one to two more school years) to catch up than their counterparts from poor but less impoverished communities.

6. Scholarly Significance

The findings presented in this study are of significance as they illustrate how a school system can be an effective change agent to improve the academic outcome and success potential for

inner-city children. This innovative MSIC project, which started off with a few schools, has evolved into a system-wide response to poverty, gradually expanding to 150 elementary and seven secondary schools and reaching over 63,000 students in the city's neediest communities. By continuing to meet the needs of the most vulnerable populations within the context of their community and using the school as a "hub" for services, MSIC is leading the way for a 21st century integration model. In fact, this educational model to combat child poverty has been presented and recognized internationally. As a result of this and related initiatives, the TDSB was awarded the prestigious Carl Bertelsmann Prize in Germany under the theme of "Integration through Education – Fairness for All".

Finally, it cannot be overemphasized enough that research has played an instrumental role in the MSIC journey. Since its inception, ongoing data collection and regular feedback have become part of the essential ingredients to help individual model schools as well as the school system identify student and community needs, monitor progress, inform practices, and guide directions along the way. The summative findings provide evidence for the school board, government agencies and community partners to make informed decisions about funding and resource allocation. This MSIC initiative offers a viable model of how theories, policies, practices and research can work hand-in-hand to become an agent for educational change toward closing the persistent achievement gap due to poverty.

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